

Asking and Answering the Big Questions

Video Transcript

The famous Greek philosopher Socrates favored a form of inquiry in which individuals used questions to guide a collaborative dialogue that might help them discover truth.

In the general spirit of this Socratic method, we can view the philosophical developments in the Classical period as providing different answers to three primary questions.

How do we explain the existence and function of the universe?

Until about 2,500 years ago, thinkers attributed the existence of the universe to divine forces, such as gods. Beginning with the Milesian School, Greek philosophers searched for the basic substances that made up the universe and drove it.

What is the nature of reality and how is knowledge gained? How do human beings fit into the greater scheme of things?

This question gave rise to the rationalist and empiricist schools of thinking. Empiricists, like Thales and Aristotle, held that knowledge was attained through our five physical senses. In contrast, the rationalists, such as Parmenides and Plato, believed that it was possible to gain knowledge without the aid of the senses.

What is the good life and how do we attain happiness?

In the 3rd century BCE, Zeno of Citium founded stoicism, which sees human happiness as being found in not allowing ourselves to be controlled by our emotions – pleasure or our fear of pain – but in using our minds to live in agreement with the world around us and to do our part in nature's plan. The greatest good for a human being is the possession of virtue.

Around the same time, the philosopher Epicurus espoused that the essence of a happy life was pleasure, which was gained by gaining knowledge of the workings of the world and by limiting one's desires.

The search for answers to these three questions led to important advancements in math and science, and also had a significant impact on education and the arts. In addition, Neoplatonic and Stoic ideas played an influential role in the thinking of early Christian philosophers, whose influence was spread with the growth of the Roman empire and Western culture.

As you think about the three fundamental questions asked by Greco-Roman philosophers – (1) “How does the universe work?” (2) “What is the nature of reality and how do we know things?” and (3) “How do we attain happiness?” – in which area do you feel humans have made the most progress over the past 2,000 years?

About this transcript:

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